

Chimerical

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Episode 12: Permutation

Ra'kanishu rises from his bed the next morning, having slept alone the previous night, as he often does. He stretches his arms and back, groaning as his muscles flex. He rubs his eyes and looks to the other bed in the room; it remains empty and made, having yet to be slept in. Jo'dehki was to bunk with Nish, but never left Arientia's company. Nish collects his belongings and attaches his weapon belt, before stepping out into the hall. To his surprise, Pecia and the caravanners are already awake and eating breakfast, as is Fjorn, though he does not see Jo'dehki, Arientia, or her elite guards anywhere.

He walks through the hall and enters the dining room, sitting at the same table as Pecia and Fjorn. They both eat a stew of poultry and potatoes; a large bowl sitting in the center holds the meal, which they pour into smaller personal bowls with a wooden ladle. Pecia greets him with a wide smile, her head pointing down as her eyes gaze up at him. She moves her bangs from her face as she waves to the Imperial spellsword.

“Hello there, mister wizard. How nice of you to grace us with your presence.” Fjorn quips.

Nish grumbles as he takes a small bowl and pours stew into it with the ladle.

“Did you get much sleep?” Pecia asks with a concerned look.

“Some...” Nish mutters.

“I’m sorry...” She laments. “Well, you’ll sleep well tonight, I’m sure.” She smiles.

Nish tastes the stew before setting the bowl down, a look of dissatisfaction upon him.

“What’s wrong?” Fjorn asks.

“It’s barely warm.” Nish complains.

“We’ve been up for a little while already.” Pecia remarks.

“Beggars can’t be choosers, Nish.” Fjorn adds.

Nish grimaces at Fjorn as he ignites a finger and aims it at the bowl, firing a thin orange haze into it. The contents quickly begin to steam. He tastes the stew again, closing his eyes as he lets out a sigh of relief. Fjorn snickers and waves a hand, though Pecia seems quite impressed. As the

three sit at the table and eat, Jo'dehki suddenly stumbles from the hallway, slipping on his tunic and yawning, his gaping maw revealing his sharp teeth. He looks around the dining room, where Nish promptly waves, motioning for him to join the three. Fjorn looks quite displeased as he crosses his arms and leans back in his chair.

"Everyone is rested now, yes?" Jo'dehki asks as he pulls out a chair.

"Eh... I'm sure you are." Nish smirks.

"Indeed." Jo'dehki grins.

"Thanks for leaving us all day, by the way. I've grown used to your constant chatter; I forgot how hard it is to talk to Fjorn." Nish remarks.

"I only speak when I have something interesting to say, unlike some people." Fjorn retorts.

"Jo'dehki would like to apologize for his absence. His behavior was inconsiderate and rude... But he doubts you can blame him for succumbing to Arientia's wiles."

"Of course... Who wouldn't prefer a master with breasts?" Fjorn quips.

Jo'dehki turns to Fjorn, his eyes narrowing as he bears his teeth. His lips curls into a devious smile.

"She was a very attentive master... She must like cats, because she greatly enjoyed petting this one. Jo'dehki even stroked her in return, with more than his hands." Jo'dehki taunts the Nord.

Fjorn glares at the smug Khajiit. Taking hold of his bowl, he quickly slurps the rest of the stew, dropping the empty wooden bowl loudly onto the table.

“And with that, it’s time I depart this circus act. Have a nice life.” Fjorn says as he stands from the table.

“Wait... That’s it?” Nish asks in surprise.

“Yes. I’m off to join the Fighters Guild.” Fjorn answers.

He pulls up a small leather pouch that is tied to his belt. He carefully unties the pouch and sets it on the table next to Nish. The spellsword takes the pouch and looks it over. Small glass vials within it clank together as he shifts the pouch in his hand.

“What’s this?” He asks the Nord.

“Healing and rejuvenating potions that I made from my remaining supplies last night. I didn’t bother to label them, since you already know what they look like. I want you to keep them with you on your journey home... Hopefully you won’t need them, but I’m sure you will.” Fjorn chuckles.

“Thanks. If you want to change your mind...”

“That’s not going to happen.” Fjorn interrupts. “If I never see you again, it’s been an honor and a pleasure.” He says to Nish. “As for you...” He turns to Jo’dehki.

Fjorn stares blankly at the Cathay-Raht for a moment. With his lips pressed tightly together, his nostrils flare as he breathes. Without speaking a word, he waves a hand once, then turns and walks away.

“This one will miss him...” Jo’dehki sarcastically comments as the front door slams behind the Nord.

“Eh...” Nish shrugs.

Pecia seems quite surprised as she looks over to the spellword.

“Didn’t you travel with him for a while?” She asks.

“Just about two years.” Nish answers.

“That’s a long time to put up with his snoring.” Jo’dehki quips.

“And you’re okay with him just leaving like that?” Pecia presses.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He chuckles.

“I don’t know... I just thought that after so long you might care a bit more.” She remarks.

“This one is surprised as well.” Jo’dehki adds.

“Ahzirr vabekaoh trevana...” He replies.

“What?” Pecia asks.

“I’m sorry.” Nish turns to her. “We were not friends. We were travel companions, who used each other’s skills symbiotically. I’ll miss having a healer around, but Fjorn

was often very difficult to deal with, on a personal level.” He explains.

Jo’dehki reaches out and takes a bowl, pouring himself some stew.

“So... When is Arientia waking up?” Pecia asks.

“She has already left.” Jo’dehki answers.

“Really?!” She raises an eyebrow.

“She warned Jo’dehki last night that she would gone by morning. She was quite thoughtful.” He adds.

“I’ve been up since dawn, and I never saw her, or her men.” She says.

“Jo’dehki was surprised as well; he didn’t think that she would be able to walk so soon afterward.” The Khajiit grins.

The girl’s face flushes, and she looks away from the Cathay-Raht.

“Must be all that military training.” Nish quips.

The two men share a laugh while Pecia seems quite embarrassed. Silence befalls the group as the two males eat.

“So, when do we depart?” Jo’dehki suddenly asks.

“As soon as we are done with our breakfast. I already sent one of the merchants out to hire new guards to escort us to Anvil, and the others are already preparing the caravan too.” Pecia answers.

Satisfied with the young woman’s answer, they continue to eat their breakfast. Nish looks into his bowl and seems to fall into a trance, staring at the golden-brown liquid. He seems deep in thought, but neither Pecia nor Jo’dehki disturb him. After a moment, he continues to eat, and the three soon finish their breakfast. They rise from their seats and Nish ties the pouch of potions to his belt. The young Imperial woman pulls her hair back, tying it in a manner similar to braids often worn by the Bosmer and Altmer.

She leads the two men, exiting the inn and walking west down the intricate brick road. Several hundred paces away from the inn, the other merchants of the caravan finish prepping their carts for the journey. Beside the merchants are a score of men and women, both men and mer; none are beast-folk. They wear various leather and iron armors, bearing all manner of weapons of varying quality. They are not professional mercenaries, city guards, or members of the Fighters Guild, but a group of ragtag sellswords chosen seemingly at random, or perhaps from a hiring board. Nish and Jo’dehki look to each other apprehensively; neither of them is comfortable with the merchant’s choice in security.

“Vara jer kolithka iho jaadi?” Jo’dehki asks.

“Dov.” Nish replies.

“Ahziss vaoh vayma.” The Khajiit murmurs. “Ike ahziss hika, reji ahziss fede.”

“Ba jer kasash.” Nish quietly agrees.

The caravan, led by Pecia, soon departs the Imperial City. They march along the Gold Road, a main trade route through Cyrodiil. At first, Nish and Jo’dehki stand near Pecia, leading the way, but as they march further away from the safety of the city, Jo’dehki slowly slips further back. Nish steps closer to the young woman, who grows increasingly nervous. He walks so close to her, that their hands occasionally brush against each other. He gently taps her hand with his fingers, gaining her attention.

“W-what is it?” She quietly stammers.

“We don’t trust the guards your men hired. Jo’dehki is watching them now, but if I fall behind as well, don’t be afraid. Trust out judgement.” He whispers to her.

Nish is careful not to let any of the other guards see his lips moving, in case they can read them. Pecia nods, her eyes never turning away from the spellsword. Whether this is due to her interest in Ra’kanishu, or not wanting to tip off any spies amongst them, he cannot be sure, but he appreciates it nonetheless. They walk for several hours, winding along the Gold Road. As they pass a line of trees, they can see a plume of black smoke rising in the distance. Several guards immediately draw their weapons, behaving nervously. It is clear to the duo that these guards are quite inexperienced.

Some guards want to race ahead, but Pecia quickly stops them. She turns to Nish, looking to him for guidance. He turns back to her, and silently mouths 'keep walking'. She nods, keeping the guards under control and calming the worried merchants among her caravan. As they march closer to the source of the vertical black haze, other guards seem to become more agitated. Jo'dehki eyes a Bosmer with large brown pouch tucked partly underneath his cheap and rusted iron armor. It contains a strangely shaped object that is long and curved.

As the pouch protrudes, the Bosmer quickly reaches back and slides it underneath his armor. They follow the road, walking around a large hill. Nish looks between the hill and the fields, as though he were expecting an ambush at any moment. They can see bodies lying on the road a distance ahead of them, smoke rising from a charred wagon that had been hit with several flaming arrows. They approach the scene very cautiously. The remains of a massacred convoy stare back at the caravan. A few dead bandits in cheap cloth, leather and iron armors lie beside the poorly defended convoy.

"These bandits look eerily familiar." Jo'dehki remarks.

"Over here." A merchant calls out.

As Nish, Jo'dehki, and several guards approach, they can see a crudely drawn clawed hand in golden paint adorning the chest plate of a dead bandit. Though the other

merchants and guards talk amongst themselves, speculating on what the symbol means, Nish and Jo'dehki turn to each other. They know that these must be Daro'veera's men. The guilt weighs heavy on the Imperial, who feels personally responsible for all that the Suthay-Raht has done since he helped release her.

As Nish looks to Jo'dehki, he spots a female Dunmer who does not seem either surprised or curious about the painted marks. An uneasy feeling develops in the pit of his stomach. He narrows his eyes, and Jo'dehki turns. As the Khajiit glances back, he sees the Dunmer's casual behavior and feels the same. The caravan is understandably concerned, and Pecia immediately orders them to move on. Her caravan is not looking for anything more than an easy walk to Anvil. They press on to Skingrad. Jo'dehki continues to walk near the rear, now watching both the Dunmer and the Bosmer.

As the smoke from the slaughtered caravan disappears behind them, the Bosmer begins to look around rather nervously. Jo'dehki doesn't trust the man, who seems to feel underneath his armor for the pouch. The Dunmer's weak hand rests on the sheath, gently tipping it towards his strong hand, as though he were preparing to draw his sword. Jo'dehki trained eyes cannot ignore the obvious signs.

"Zatay!" Jo'dehki calls out loudly.

Several guards look back at the large Khajiit, eyebrows raised in confusion. Nish turns, looking over his shoulder at his friend. Jo'dehki holds up an empty waterskin in the air.

"Drank yours already?" Nish chuckles.

The guards turn back, realizing that it wasn't important. Nish leaves Pecia's side, falling back to Jo'dehki. As the two trade waterskins, Jo'dehki clandestinely points a claw at the Bosmer, then at the Dunmer.

"Jaja qo vara may'a. Ahzisse var dar jajo dreamer. Vakota vado ahziss." Jo'dehki whispers.

"Ahzisse rasin jer." Nish whispers back.

Nish charges a hand with a small flame as Jo'dehki steps away from him. He slowly and silently draws his dagger from its sheath. As the Bosmer reaches for the pouch, Jo'dehki strikes. He grabs the Bosmer from behind, his clawed hand gripping the small mer's chin. He pulls his head back and draws the blade across his throat, slashing it open. The guards and merchants are flabbergasted, watching the murder unfold before them. The Dunmer draws their sword, as does a Breton. They rush toward the Khajiit, but are stopped in their tracks by Nish, who holds both hands before him, large flames swirling just beyond his palms.

“By the eight!” A guard yells.

“You murderer!” A merchant shouts.

“What is going on back there?!” Pecia demands, pushing through the crowd.

As she approaches the rear of the group, she gasps, covering her mouth with her hands. She looks up to the duo, who glare at the other guards.

“This one was not a guard, but a spy.” Jo’dehki begins, searching the Bosmer’s body for evidence.

He finds the pouch and opens it, revealing a horn. Pecia seems to recognize it.

“That’s just like the horn that hunter blew before the ambush!” Pecia declares.

“There must be hundreds of horns like it!” A merchant scoffs.

“Then why was he trying to reach it?” Nish asks.

“The Bosmer was going to signal for an ambush.” Jo’dehki adds.

As the merchants and guards seem to debate the validity of the claim, the Dunmer and Breton suddenly rush the Imperial and Khajiit. They try to take the horn from Jo’dehki, who pulls back, to the others shock. Nish quickly

ignites the Breton in flames. He screams and flails, but Nish doesn't stop. He burns him until he collapses dead, his flesh blackened like an overdone chicken. Jo'dehki drops the horn and kicks it back, away from the crowd. As the Dunmer chops with his sword, Jo'dehki grabs his wrist and stabs him in the gut with his dagger.

He pulls the dagger from the wounded Dunmer and stabs her again, before dropping her onto the ground. The Dunmer coughs up a small amount of blood as the other guards aim their swords at the dark elf. A guard and a merchant grab the Dunmer by the armpits and drag her to a large rock just beside the road, sitting her up against it. Nish retrieves the horn, handing it directly to Pecia, who examines the instrument.

"Who are you?" Jo'dehki growls.

"A recruit of the Golden Hands..." The Dunmer weakly answers.

"What was your plan?" The Khajiit demands.

The Dunmer hesitates to speak, and Jo'dehki grows impatient. He glides the blade of his dagger across the left cheek of the dark elf, cutting her deeply. She cries out in pain and turns her face.

"This one does not tire easily... Speak..." Jo'dehki warns.

“The three of us... We were going to signal an ambush just up the road... From the southern forest...” The Dunmer begins.

“Who leads you?”

“A female Khajiit with animal feet... I don’t know what breed that is. I don’t know her name either. A black-haired Imperial is her go-between.” The Dunmer continues.

“How do you not know your leader’s name?” A guard asks in disbelief.

“We’re recruits... We were being initiated into the gang. Recruits aren’t allowed to meet her. I only saw her once, and from a distance.” The Dunmer replies.

Pecia and her merchants listen in shock. The other guards all look terrified of the ambush ahead, which puts Nish’s mind at ease; if they were a part of the plan, they’re body language would have let that be known by now.

“I think the other guards are clean. They look too scared to be spies.” He whispers into Pecia’s ear.

She turns and smiles. Satisfied that he knows all he needs to, Jo’dehki quickly executes the Dunmer with a violence jab to the heart. He stands, wiping the blood from his blade with a torn piece of the Dunmer’s clothes, before returning it to its sheath. Pecia places a hand on Nish’s cheek and leans in, giving him a rather tender kiss upon his lips. As Jo’dehki approaches, she does the same for him as well.

“You both saved this caravan. I’m so grateful you were here, and did what you did.” She says to the men.

“Thank you, but we aren’t safe yet.” Nish replies.

The caravan returns to the Gold Road, leaving the bodies behind as they march west. Without the spies to blow the signal, they hope that they can walk past the ambush unnoticed. To be certain, the caravan stops for a moment while Nish and Jo’dehki scout ahead. They walk just north of the road first. When they decide to return to the caravan, they walk just south of the road, through the southern forest. They see a large bandit camp in a clearing within the forest. The camp is nearly a kilometer from the road, and prepares for battle.

Creeping back to the caravan, the duo delivers their report. Using the knowledge gleaned from their scouting expedition, they travel safely to Skingrad, avoiding further incident. As the afternoon turns to evening, they reach the large city. Not wanting to cost any more innocents their lives, the duo finds a detachment of city guards patrolling the streets near the eastern wall. With Pecia joining them, the guards lead the three to their Captain, a middle aged and battle hardened Imperial male named Aferen Junis. They present the horn and explain the incident, carefully omitting their previous experiences with, and knowledge of Daro’veera. The old warrior looks quite impressed by their tale. He smirks, crossing his arms as he listens to the three.

“I’ll double up the patrols and post warnings near the gates... Have either of you thought about joining the guards?” Aferen asks, looking between Nish and Jo’dehki.

“And surrender all of that lovely personal freedom?!” Nish jests.

“Suit yourself.” Aferen’s chuckles.

With the deed completed, they return to the caravan. To Pecia’s surprise, many of the guards had chosen to follow them to Anvil, and some have even opted to join the caravan to Auridon. With their carts and goods accounted for and secured, they begin searching for rooms at the local inns. They soon find a large inn with enough rooms for the entire group. Some of the guards and merchants prepare for the night, while others eat dinner in the main hall. There, in the dining hall, Nish and Jo’dehki share a final meal with Pecia; come the morning, they will part ways.

They eat, drink, and talk with each other, but Nish seems despondent and not at all like himself. Jo’dehki notices, as does Pecia, but neither of them pry, though Pecia is certainly tempted. They finish their meals, but sit in the hall and talk for hours, until the sun has set and the two moons creep into the sky. Pecia grows weary and asks Nish to escort her to her room. The spellsword obliges, leading her down the hall. To Jo’dehki’s surprise, Ra’kanishu returns only moments later.

“You did not want to stay with her?” The Khajiit asks.

Nish shrugs his shoulders.

“You should. She certainly likes you, and you may not receive another opportunity.” Jo’dehki continues.

“Please leave it alone...” Nish murmurs.

“What’s the matter, my friend? You haven’t been yourself in quite some time... You can tell Jo’dehki.”

Nish sighs and sits back in his chair. He tilts his head back and looks up at the ceiling for a moment.

“Do you like Pecia?” The Khajiit asks.

“She’s a good person, and I won’t soon forget her, but that’s not what’s wrong... It’s a lack of sleep, I think...” Nish begins.

“Comfortable beds cost more, and you could have a woman’s company, if you just walk down the hall.” Jo’dehki grins.

“Bad dreams... .. Smart ass.” Nish silently chuckles.

“I see... Visited by the dead?” Jo’dehki solemnly asks.

“Tsanavi...”

“Who?” The Khajiit raises a brow.

“Tsanavi is a Suthay, and the young woman I left behind when I had to leave the village...”

“Really?! Where you very close?” He presses.

“We were...” Nish sighs sorrowfully.

“... How close?”

Nish turns his eyes, looking down at the Khajiit who sits, eagerly awaiting his answer.

“Very... We felt and tasted each other, but that’s where it ended. I think she wanted more, but I had to leave before we grew closer.” Nish admits with a grin.

“Interesting... Why would you leave such a girl?”

“I didn’t want to leave, but I had too.” Nish replies.

“You never considered staying at another village, or moving to a city? This one finds it hard to believe that you had done something bad enough to justify leaving the province.” Jo’dehki retorts.

“Like you?”

“... That was different.” Jo’dehki murmurs.

“I’m sorry. That was uncalled for...”

“Forgiven.” Jo’dehki nods.

“I must shamefully admit that I wasn’t sure how I truly felt about Tsanavi until several months after I had left. At the time, I was so despondent that I started walking, and I didn’t stop until I was in Malabal Tor... When the realization hit me, I was already on my journey. In retrospect, I should have gone back then and there and told her sooner. I often don’t understand my own motivations.” Nish replies.

“Jo’dehki is certain she will be happy to see you when you return.”

“I hope so... I would hate to return home and find that she has forgotten about me, or had someone else’s cubs. What if she took ill and died, and I go back to her standing stones?” Nish seems to think aloud.

“You shouldn’t dwell on the things that are not in your power to control. Focus on the journey, my friend.” Jo’dehki tells him.

“... Perhaps you’re right.” Nish murmurs.

“When is Jo’dehki wrong?” He smirks.

Nish chuckles as he stares back at the ceiling. Suddenly, a woman’s voice interrupts the moment. As a bard plays a lute in the background, the shapely young Dunmer asks the Khajiit to dance with her. Jo’dehki grins and immediately obliges. Nish turns in his chair, watching Jo’dehki and the strange Dunmer girl dancing slowly with each other to the bard’s music. Her hands reach down, caressing his buttocks. Jo’dehki leans in, appearing to neck her. He pulls her closer, his tail slowly swaying. Nish sighs and takes his mug of honey lager, guzzling it down.

“I’m beginning to understand why Fjorn drank so much...” The Imperial mutters to himself as he sits alone at the table.